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California's Cost of Obesity Climbs to \$41 Billion

DAVIS, CA, July 9, 2009 ... More than just unhealthy, California's increasing girth is crippling the state's economy, according to a study of the economic cost of obesity in California released today by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA). In just six years, reported economic costs of adult overweight, obesity and physical inactivity have nearly doubled and are now costing California an estimated \$41 billion a year.

An update of a 2000 report, the study shows a 33 percent rise in obesity rates contributed to sharp increases not only in health care costs but also in lost productivity. The report is based on the latest available data and scientific research on the relationship between overweight, obesity, and physical activity, and their collective impact on health care expenditures and worker productivity.

"To put this in perspective, the economic cost to California of adults who are obese, overweight and physically inactive is equivalent to more than a third of the state's total budget," says California State Controller John Chiang. "Think of the programs we could protect, the children we could educate and the families we could help if we could recapture those dollars by investing in prevention. These figures demonstrate the real and very unsettling financial impact of the obesity epidemic on a California economy already in crisis."

A leading national health econometrics consulting firm based in North Carolina, Chenoweth & Associates, was commissioned by the California Department of Health Services in 2000 to generate the first cost of obesity study. CCPHA hired the firm to update the study to get a more contemporary picture. Chenoweth and Associates found that overweight and obesity claimed a slightly larger percentage of the annual costs (\$21 billion) than did physical inactivity (\$20.2

billion). They also predict that the trend for dramatic growth in costs will continue and conservatively project that by the year 2011 costs will climb to \$53 billion.

“These rapidly escalating costs paint an alarming picture for our state,” says Dr. Harold Goldstein, executive director of the CCPHA, which commissioned the study. “They underscore the need to build community health and prevention into public policies at every level, from national health care reform and the state’s use of federal stimulus funding to regional growth and local policies that help people to eat healthy food and be more physically active.”

In addition to a new statewide figure, today’s study provides an accounting of obesity costs by county. While it is not surprising that the largest counties have the largest costs, the numbers nevertheless are staggering: Los Angeles County – \$11.9 billion; Orange County – \$3.3 billion; San Diego County – \$3 billion; Alameda County – \$2.2 billion; Santa Clara County – \$2.1 billion; and Sacramento County – \$1.7 billion.

As dire as the report’s findings may be, the authors point out that even small improvements in health can have a considerable impact. A 5 percent improvement in the rate of physical activity and healthy weight over five years could trim almost \$12 billion from the state’s obesity costs.

“The obesity crisis may seem overwhelming, but California has successfully tackled big health issues before,” says, Kim Belshé, Secretary of California Health and Human Services Agency, who helped design and lead the state’s nationally recognized tobacco programs. “The key is to establish concrete changes at the federal, state, and local level to make it easier for people to make healthier choices. This study shows that if those changes can help just one Californian in twenty reduce their weight and become more physically active, we could realize significant savings and begin to turn this crisis around.”

Echoing the need to address environmental issues that encourage poor diet was the study’s funder. “There are many communities where it is easier to get a cheeseburger than an apple. Communities such as these are designed for disease because of poor planning and policies that actually contribute to the epidemic,” says Robert K. Ross, M.D., president and CEO of The California Endowment, which funded the study. “In order to address the obesity epidemic effectively we must take a cogent look at what is driving it. We must move toward local, state and federal policies that seek to improve community environments and develop opportunities for physical activity.”

CCPHA is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization leading efforts in California to understand and address the state's growing obesity crisis. For more information on this legislation, visit the CCPHA site at: www.publichealthadvocacy.org.

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EDITORS NOTE: The full study and supporting materials, including a list of local spokespersons, are available on-line at: www.publichealthadvocacy.org/*****

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